

PRAYER

Yesterday I spoke about power. Today I want to speak about prayer, for it is thru prayer that the power of the Holy Spirit comes to us. Prayer was the secret of Jesus' power. Over and over again in the gospels we read verses like this: "And in the morning, rising up a great while before day, Jesus went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed" (Mk. 1:35). (He was a busy man. His whole life work was crowded into less than three short years. But he knew that he must have time to pray. Why?)

(Didn't Jesus know that prayer was superstitious?) That is what some tell us today. And I will agree that sometimes prayer is superstitious. Four summers ago my wife and I drove down into Mexico for a vacation. One day we saw on the highway a long procession coming from a little village, and in the center were men carrying a platform, and standing on the platform, under a red silk covering, was a big plaster statue. We asked them what they were doing. "Praying for rain," they said. This is St. Francis, the patron saint of our village, and we are taking him out to show him how dry our fields are.

Those men called themselves Christians, but ~~that is~~ superstitious prayer. Why? What is the difference between that prayer, and the prayers of Jesus? The difference is this. They were praying to a God that did not exist, a plaster statue whose eyes were blind to their fields, and whose ears were deaf to their prayers. But Jesus' prayers were prayers to the living God, his Heavenly Father, the God of heaven and earth, the stars and all the seas, (and "whose arm is not shortened that he cannot save"). It all depends on the God you pray to. If your God and mine is the living God of Jesus Christ, then it is no more superstitious to pray to him than to pray to your own father.

People who call prayer superstitious only betray their own lack of understanding. Suppose an African savage, straight from the jungle, should walk into your house one day and see you talking into a little black box over on the wall. "What are you doing?" he might say. "Why, I am talking to my father in Shanghai," you'd say. "Talking to your father? I don't see him anywhere." "Of course not, he's in Shanghai." "He's in Shanghai, but you are talking to him there?" "Of course, I'm telephoning to him." "You mean you speak into that black box and you think he can hear you?" "Naturally, he can hear me as well as you can. Don't be silly." And then the savage looks at his friend, and shakes his head, and taps his forehead, "Superstition. My, but they have silly superstitions here." As long as a man does not understand the telephone, he will think you are superstitious; and as long as a man does not understand the power and presence of God he will think that prayer is superstition.

But Jesus walked and talked with God, and he taught his disciples to pray. He teaches us three kinds of prayer.

The first is the kind of prayer that asks God to do what we want. This is the prayer of Need, and is the most common and natural of all prayers. It is the way children will always talk to a father: "Daddy, I need a new dress. Please, please buy me one." Of course, being grown-up, we don't ask God for new clothes, but we still come to him for the things we think we need--for health when we are sick; for help in time of trouble; sometimes, perhaps, just to ask him to help us pass examinations. But isn't this almost like those superstitious Mexicans praying for rain? In a way, I suppose, it is, but I am not sure that it is altogether wrong. Jesus tells us to ask God for things. "Ye have not because ye ask not," he says. And in the Lord's Prayer he teaches us to pray even for our daily food.

It is perfectly right and proper to ask God for things--just as right as for children to ask an earthly father for the things they need. The real question is not, "Is it all right to ask?" but, "Will God answer?" Christians say he does. There is a story of answered prayer that has always meant a good deal to our family, the

story of some old Scotch spiritual ancestors of ours, the Covenanters. They were Christians who were being persecuted for worshipping God according to their conscience. They chose rather to be hunted through the hills than to give up their faith. Fleeing before the cruel soldiers, one day, a group of them took refuge ~~from~~ in a cave. But the soldiers were so close behind that they knew in only a few moments they would be found and killed, so they fell on their knees and asked God to save them. ~~And~~ Even as they prayed, a spider came and spun a web across the entrance to the cave. The soldiers came. "They have gone in there," said one, and started into the cave. Suddenly he stopped. "No, they're not in here. There's a spiderweb across the mouth here, and they couldn't have gone in without breaking it." So the soldiers went on, and the Christians were safe--saved by God who answered their prayer.

Yes, God does answer prayer. But it is not quite as simple as we sometimes make it sound. ^{Not all persecuted has are saved from death like that} He answers prayer on one condition, and that condition is faith. Some people think this means that if you believe God will give you what you ask for, then he will give you what you ask. But that is not what Jesus teaches. It is not faith in prayer, or faith in your own asking, that God demands. God's condition for answering prayer is faith in Himself.

Is that prayer?
What should God
do?

^{makes a big} That is the ~~kind~~ of difference that faith makes in prayer. Once there were two brothers, one a farmer, one a potter. The farmer prayed for rain, "I need rain, Lord. You can see for yourself how dry my fields are." But his brother, the potter, prayed for sunshine, "I need the sun, Lord. My pots must have sun or they cannot dry." The next day it rained, and the potter said, "I've been cheated. God doesn't answer prayer at all." And his brother the farmer said, "Thank you, Lord. Now I really believe in prayer." But did he really believe in God? No, ^{he believed in} just in prayer, and in his own need. But what God asks is faith in Himself--a faith that will stand regardless of the answer, that will stand whether he sends rain or sun. This is the ~~second~~ second kind of prayer--the prayer of faith. It is higher than the prayer of need.

On the last night, the night in which Jesus was betrayed, Jesus prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. In agony of spirit he asked that he might be spared the sufferings of the cross, and ~~his prayer~~ so great was his need and so earnest his prayer that he sweated as with drops of blood. But it was not his need which came first, for as he wrestled with his spirit, there came peace, and he said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but Thine be done." That is what faith in God ~~in prayer~~ means: ^{when you pray} not rudely demanding that he do you will, but trusting Him to do His will as being best for you. That is the prayer of faith.

And what is the third kind of prayer, the highest of all. It is the prayer that asks nothing of God at all. It is ^{faith} an attitude of mind and spirit that delights simply in the practice of the presence of God. It is communion. It is fellowship with the Father. And this is the prayer of power. There is no other way to spiritual power but communion with Him who is the source of all power.